

**Bachelor's thesis**

**NTNU**  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Architecture and Design  
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art

My Bengtsson

# Panta Rhei (Everything Flows)

Bachelor's thesis in Fine Arts

Supervisor: Felix Gmelin

Co-supervisor: Susanne Winterling

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## **Introduction:**

Panta Rhei (“Everything Flows” expression by Heraclitus 535-475 b.c.) is a project that developed into an exhibition with the same name created by me, My Bengtsson and Towa Palovaara at Gallery Blunk in Trondheim, Norway.

Palovaara is based in Stockholm and Kiruna is a BFA-student at Konstfack in Stockholm. She sent her sculptures via truck in a specific container that only contained her work to me a BFA-student at the Trondheim Art Academy. The project was about containers as a metaphorical product and about the then current shortage of containers in the world due to Covid-19 and the Container vessel stranded in the Suez Canal in 2021 at the same time the project also reflected on the relationship between two individual artists in the present time of Covid-19 and the inability to meet physically and therefore communicate by sending artwork as a gesture of love and devotion. The emotional bond that distance can create and to present a final representation of this was what this exhibition came to visualize in combination with a comment on the infrastructural situation in a modern global society. Which factors in our society today can limit communication between individuals?

Containers represent the contemporary trade and infrastructural situation. They represent the room of trade and make the flow of goods in a modern global society possible. The exhibition consisted of three visual components: Firstly: The container itself. Secondly: the sculptures with a video projection inside the container. Lastly: a documentary summery in the gallery space of Gallery Blunk.

As a reflection on the exhibition Panta Rhei, I have come to use the essay “The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks

as Traps” by Alfred Gell,<sup>1</sup> to try to define the three components of the exhibition mentioned above and discuss possible ways to define this project as art. In this essay, Gell introduces the idea of the usage of three possible ways to interpret art. “Aesthetic theory”, “interpretive theory” and “institutional theory”. In this text I will explain these theories and apply them to my process of reflection upon the project *Panta Rhei*.

### **The Three Defining Theories.**

Alfred Gell writes and argues that at the present time there can be turbulence when trying to define the idea of an artwork, the definition and questions that arises when discussing “when is a fabricated object an artwork and when is it considered an artefact?” For Gell, there are three possible answers he devotes to share his thoughts on. The first one he calls “aesthetic theory” which he emphasizes is mostly used by the so called general public whom also tend to think that visual attractiveness or beauty is something recognizable automatically. In this theory a work of art can be defined as any object that is aesthetically superior having certain qualities of visual appealingness. This point of view also, according to Gell, indicates that the artist is understood to intentionally use their skills and knowledge to activate the capacity present in all human beings to aesthetically react to the art piece created. The artist has the knowledge of beauty to create it. And beauty in itself is a concept that is external and universal. This theory however is not what Gell wants to focus on. Instead,

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<sup>1</sup> Gell Alfred, *The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, 1999 P. 187-214  
[https://monoskop.org/images/4/48/Gell\\_Alfred\\_The\\_Art\\_of\\_Anthropology\\_Essays\\_and\\_Diagrams\\_1999.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/48/Gell_Alfred_The_Art_of_Anthropology_Essays_and_Diagrams_1999.pdf) , used: 28-03-2022.

there are two other theories present in his examination.

The second theory contrasts Aesthetic theory by arguing that an artwork is not defined by its beauty, beauty is in fact a concept that is not relevant nor defined by how interesting the art piece is to look at. Art is instead defined by if it can be “interpreted in the light of a system of ideas that is founded within an art historical tradition”. The contemporary superiority of the interpretive theory in contrast to aesthetical theory is that it is more attuned to the present-day art world where the production of beautiful paintings and sculptures is a rarity in relation to concept art. Gell brings up Damien Hirst’s shark “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” as an example. To understand this artwork, it is necessary to grasp the idea of concept and not the beauty of the piece. The piece is a dead shark in a water tank and the work is surely not as famous as it is because of its visual beauty or the craftsmanship creating it and therefore questioned by the aesthetic theory for claiming to be art at all. Instead it is in line with the post Duchampian tradition of concept art and therefore is already grounded in the already existing art historical tradition.

The final theory is a developed version of interpretation theory but called in Alfred Gells essay the “institutional theory”. The similarity is that in contrast to aesthetic theory an art piece is not defined by its material quality or the quality of the craftsmanship. And it is indeed the art world that defines the object being an art piece. The difference between the interpretive theory and the institutional theory is that the institutional theory does not adjust to the history of a certain system of ideas but is instead only defined by its present and contemporary art world consisted of artists, critics, dealers and collectors who are given the power to define art today, not history. Important to note is that Gell refers to the American philosopher of aesthetics George Dickie when explaining this



institutional theory (created by Dickie) whom points out that this theory is more of a sociological observation of the contemporary art world rather than a philosophical explanation of the definition of art. This is because institutional theory explains what really is considered art today. Not what is ought to be considered art rationally. <sup>2</sup>

### **The Contemporary World and *Panta Rhei*.**

In search of a visual representation of trade the container came to mind as it carries human trade in the contemporary global society. This transportation method can be identified as liquid by it's vague boundaries and highly intensive flow both in trading of goods and in exchange of ideas. The container as mentioned before, represent the room, the enclosed space where almost anything can be shipped via, everything from toothbrushes, salmon to the exchange of ideas. By this definition the symbolism of the container is clearly objectified and its vast and colossal aesthetic contains these streams of consciousness.

Making a statement on today's global trade in relation to what happened during covid-19 has to touch upon the concept of automatisering; How processes simplifies and tasks are performed faster by exploration and expansion of the global market because robots perform the tasks better and with less error than manpower. <sup>3</sup> The fact that Covid-19, a disease, makes the flow of goods in our modern society so vulnerable because of the manpowered tasks in harbours

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<sup>2</sup>Dickie George (1974) *Art and the Aesthetic: An institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Gell Alfred, *The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel's Net Traps as Artworks* and *Artworks as Traps*, 1999 P. 188-189, used: 28-03-2022.

<sup>3</sup>*Nationalencyklopedin*, automatisering. <http://www.ne.se/upplagsverk/encyklopedi/lang/automatisering>, used: 2022-04-01

affected by sick leaves. This created a domino effect on the global trade and also my own project Panta Rhei where it was difficult to find a forwarding agent in shipping who could offer me a container to ship Palovaaras' sculptures in. Surely, at that point, it did not feel like Heraclitus expression "Everything flows".

However, today's society has this utopian chimera that everything is automated. For instance, a fellow student at Trondheim Art Academy usually buys nose-tissues and as a result of the stranded container vessel in the Suez Canal 2021, the shipping of tissues to Norway was drastically delayed and nose-tissues could not be bought for weeks in stores in Trondheim.

### **Vogel's Net.**

In Alfred Gell's "The art of Anthropology, chapter 6: Vogel's Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps" The curatorial work of Susan Vogel at the exhibition ART/ARTEFACT at the Center for African Art in New York 1988 is discussed in relation to interpretive theory and institutional theory. Her piece was a Zande/Azande<sup>4</sup> hunters net placed in the white cube. This at the time of the late 80s provoked Arthur Danto to write in the exhibition's catalogue a critical essay regarding her bold move of presenting this as an art piece in the gallery space. Danto is especially critical of the presentation of an object that has a function, a hunters' net. For him, told by Gell, Art is not useful but instead

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<sup>4</sup> McKenna Amy, **Zande**, also called **Azande**, a people of Central Africa who speak a language of the Adamawa-Ubangi branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Extending across the Nile-Congo drainage divide, they live partly in South Sudan, partly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and partly in the Central African Republic.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zande> , used 28-03-2022.

only meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

### **The three theories and Susan Vogel's Net in relation to Panta Rhei**

The project Panta Rhei is referring to Heraclitus in the title and the purpose is to define the connection between the “flow of goods” the term often used in trade, the flexibility a container offers, transportation by sea, road train, and of course the meaning of the expression Panta Rhei “Everything flows” and the continuity of the friendship between Towa Palovaara and me and the friendships state of constant becoming. Because that is what Panta Rhei means, the state of constantly becoming. It is considered a part of Heraclitus most significant work that stand in contrast to Parmenides concept of being. The state of becoming refers to a state of constant flow in contrast to as we can imagine the static form of being. The contrast makes these two the considered two founders of ontology and the so called “One or Many” and therefore of great importance in the history of western philosophy and metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

Since Panta Rhei has these roots in philosophical terms for the room of trade and the constant state of becoming it is reliant on the historical streams of art, art theory and ideas that makes it connected to the Interpretation theory.

However, as the viewer experienced it, I would like to argue that I believe that the first impression when seeing a container outside the white cube gallery space, Gallery Blunk, I do not feel that the historical component is heavier than

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<sup>5</sup> Danto Arthur, (1988) ”Artefact and Art” in ART/ARTEFACT: African Art in Anthropology Collections, Exhibition Catalogue, New York Center for African Art. Gell Alfred, *The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel's Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, 1999 P. 189-197, used: 28-03-2022.

<sup>6</sup> Burnet John (1892) "Heraclitus". *Early Greek Philosophy*. A. and C. Black. Used: 28-03-2022.

the components that defines institutional theory since Panta Rhei is also a very contemporary product, a container; and it is being set in a non-profit gallery which is probably the reason the container is in that space seen as an art object and therefore considered art. This situation interest me, what is art, or more precisely, when does an object become art? Arthur Danto mentions in his critical essay about Susan Vogel's net that defining art is vague and "The definition has always been a product of somewhat a social consensus within cultural groups throughout time" which I as the creator of Panta Rhei certainly believe and also agrees with.

Nowadays one could argue that art has to reflect on the globalisation of our everyday life and that is what I strive for in this project. This is highly contemporary and is commenting on what defines today's art scene in a way. This contemporary reflection upon trade and the flow of goods in our society becomes art because of its intentions as well as its placement and me, the artist, saying that it is art, taking that statement. But I would like to illuminate that I personally believe that some elements in my exhibition are close to purely aesthetic like the aurora lights in the container. I believe that a viewer at some other level of consensus understand that the intention is that it should be viewed and enjoyed. Therefore, I would like to turn the interest more towards Aesthetical theory. Maybe it is not relevant to only view and art work with the eyes of Aesthetical theory but some components like in this case the aurora light can add some important visual experiences to the viewer and should therefore not be underestimated completely. Therefore, I would also like to question this method of defining art through interpretation theory or institutional theory. I believe or at least want to believe that there are something's we just know, as humans, and I believe that some esthetical art can be defined as experiences just

created within that sphere.

Also in contrast to Danto I view Panta Rhei as an art piece even though the container has another function mainly and it was logistically very challenging to use a container that is actively used for shipping and trade as an art piece. This would as in the case of Danto in Gells essay indicate that this piece should not be considered art. This statement I stand against and instead I agree with Alfred Gell that “Danto lacs familiarity with African ethnography where instead of seeing the traps as just functional, Gell emphasizes that most of the hunting is taking place either as part of specific rituals, (initiations, annual festivals, etc.) or at the very least in a highly ritualized manner, certainly not as a routine meaning to obtaining the staff of life.

*“that the value of an object, the symbolisms of it, is indeed playing with the viewers’ mind and opens a world of ideas. Now isn’t that art? “*

The article continues with an interview of Ze, an expert chanter of the Fang population in West Africa in Boyers book (1988) “Account of Wise Men”. He explains “Mvet” (epicness) and that it was often compared to traps like nets etc. which bore the significance of the ungraspable term and being of “epic”.<sup>7</sup>

### **In Front of the Real Thing.**

Maurizio Ferraris mentioned in his “new realism” the importance of placing ourselves in “front of the real thing” if you will, and that it is important to face

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<sup>7</sup> Boyers Pascal, *Account of Wise Men, Chanters of Magical Epics mvet, Among the Fang of West Africa*. 1988, Gell Alfred, *The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, 1999 P. 198, used: 28-03-2022.

the actual work of art and that before us opens a larger comprehension than just the object and reproduction in front of us. This with an aim to reach us and therefore becomes an object that takes the shape of a person rather than object.<sup>8</sup> An individual art object has a spirit one could say? Something that when it is created the action can not fully be taken back.

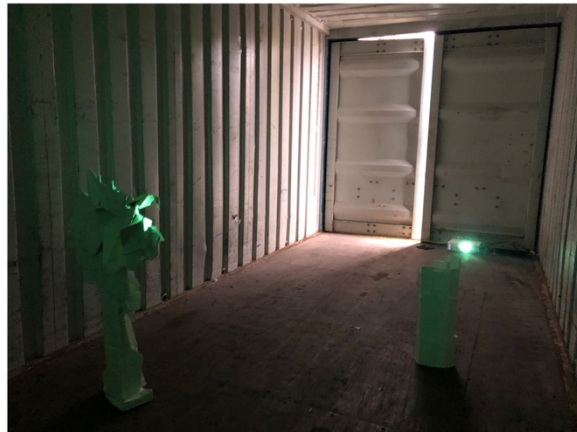
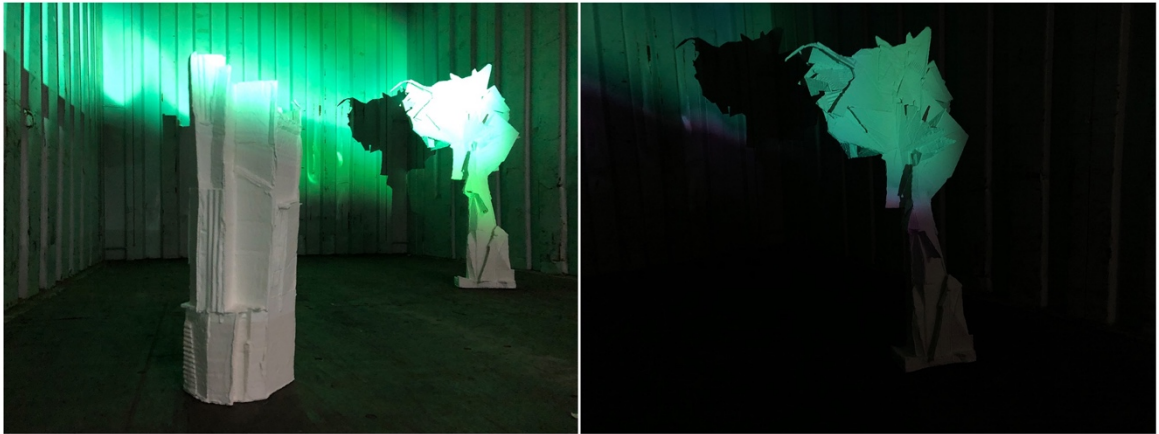
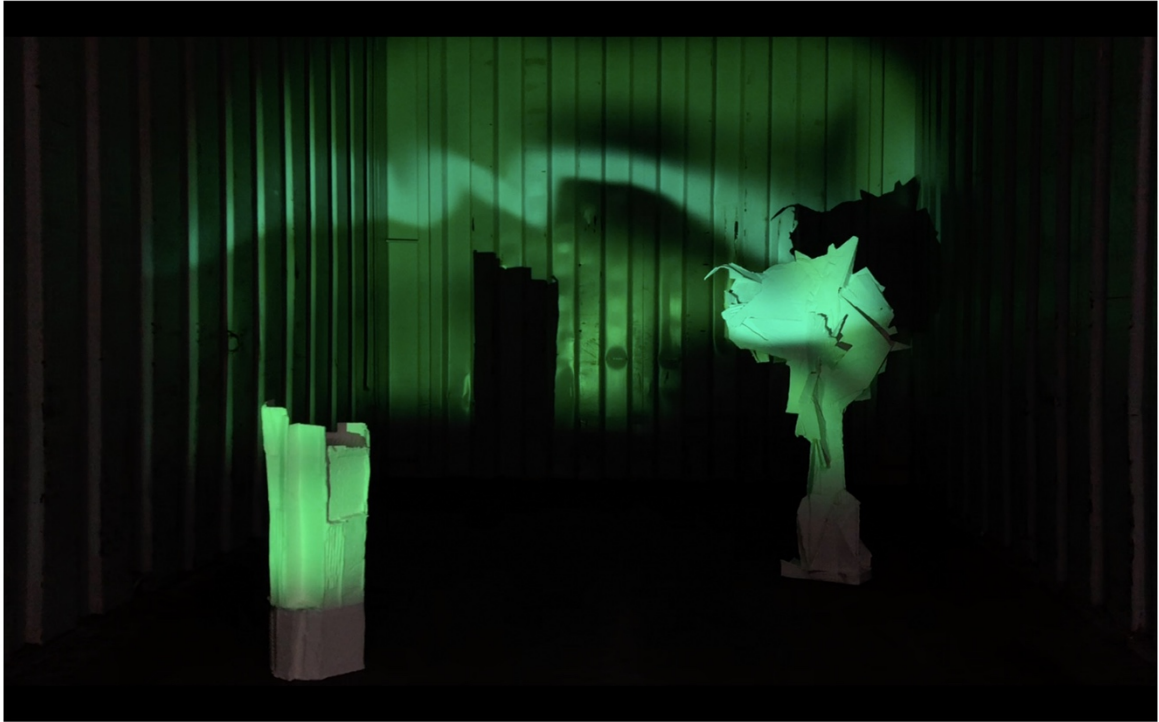
For my work *Panta Rhei* I believe that the container in it self sends all of these signals of infrastructural patterns in the northern hemisphere and about the importance of trade and logistics. On a metaphysical state this reflects humanity like a trap can represent humans. Alfred Gell explains, the trap he argues, is the prosthesis of the human hunter, something the hunter lacks but needs in order to hunt down and kill the wanted animal. Therefore, the trap defines its creator by being what the creator must create.<sup>9</sup> I think that my container is similar, it defines what I lack or society needs to be able to bulk-gain shipments in global trade. We have created the container for containing necessities in our contemporary life. And it says so much about our society and culture. For instance, when the container vessel called “Ever Given” stranded in the Suez-canal in 2021 the estimated cost of the incident on the global market was seven billion EUR worth of trade every day for seven days.<sup>10</sup> The container as concept therefore contains the economical life we live but don’t see, most products most raw-material is somehow somewhere transported to support our lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Crignon, Cyril, professor at ESA Ecole Superieure D’art du Nord-Pas-de- Calais-Suite Tourcoing, e-mail, 14-11-2021.

<sup>9</sup> Gell Alfred, *The Art of Anthropology, chapter 6 : Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, 1999 P. 189-197, used: 28-03-2022.

<sup>10</sup> Russon Mary-Ann, The cost of the Suez Canal blockage, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56559073> 29-03-2021. Used: 28-03-2022



## **Personality in Relation to Artworks.**

The Sculptures and video projection cover another layer of the human mind. I can only speak for myself but when I look inside I always feel like nature and landscapes that are important to me is one of the greatest component of myself. Memories and abstract figures build up some kind of product of oneself and most importantly is that you can take it with you wherever you go. This is what is captured in the sculptures and video projection inside the container. Placing them in the container create this liquidity of representation and portraying of the human by being what we cannot see with our eyes when we look at a person but what we lack visualized on ourselves.

When I think of personality in relation to artworks I am reflecting on the usage of the Swedish term *handlag*, I believe that *handlag* (the individual way of making art like a signature) is so strong that one artist can express herself in many art fields and still the audience will read the pieces as a product of this individual artist. And maybe it is the same as Alfred Gell says, maybe the artist always creates what he/she lacks? Maybe it is because we can read this in art that we understand art?

With this theory in mind it is also important to bring up the question about personality and the grade of personality that perhaps is expressed. I think that personality is something that to most extent exist or does not exist with some exceptions of course, but I do believe that the effect of expressing can be graded or come in different intensities and therefore must also the ability for a viewer to take in somebody else's personality or art be able to be graded. Also, if art is what the artist lack, and therefore create it; is it the personality of the art piece that speaks to the audience or is the art a physical relic of the artist personality?



An art piece can without doubt evoke different feelings and associations out of different people, the experience is subjective. But so is the experience of another person really. An art piece is physically in a room a separated object from the artist, of course, if it is not a performance or video installation where the artist is present. And the amount of personality in an art piece is a choice of its creator.

In the final part of the exhibition *Panta Rhei* I used the gallery space to place a lot of information and documentation concerning trade in the northern hemisphere and documentation of the actual voyage of the container that was sent from Stockholm, Sweden to Trondheim, Norway. I would like to argue that this element of the exhibition was consciously made with “less personality” and instead “pure information”. Now, even if I consciously wanted it to be presented without me in focus or my emotions it was still I who chose what information that was relevant and I know that personally I enjoy this type of informational art installations. Therefore, I think my personality more than any time before was shining through in this documentary visualization of the voyage and specifically through what I chose to show as information about global trade and events like the situation in the Suez Canal 2021.

### **Conclusion.**

Through reading “The art of Anthropology, chapter 6: Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps” I have come to reflect on the objects I create as art and gotten confirmation on “why” I and others consider them art, not artefacts. From the point of view in the distinction between interpretation theory and institutional theory my work *Panta Rhei* is defined by it’s surrounding aspects like the gallery’s reputation and being visual at a public art scene. Its

roots in history and part of modern art history evolution makes it justified as an art piece. Perhaps it is of greater interest to compare my piece with Arthur Danto's view on art objects in connection to his words on a hunter's net placed in a gallery space. His motivation for it not to be considered art is that it already has a function, being a trap to hunt animals with, just as my container in fact has the function of storing during transportation. Furthermore, Alfred Gell confirms the nets value as art by its metaphysical worth in the culture it was made in and as a result he argues that human creates what he lacks and therefore the objects a human makes represent themselves. At last my exhibition Panta Rhei has a series of informative texts describing infrastructural situations in the contemporary world. It was an attempt of me to be objective but in my attempt the strive to be objective resulted in a very strong mediation of my personality; something I personally believe is very hard to avoid as an artist and maybe the reason why art is appreciated by its viewers.

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